

Putting Your Best Foot Forward: the construction of military identity through footwear in Rome and the provinces

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[Slide 1] The importance of personal adornment in ancient life is one of the most evocative points of connection between the past and the present. Although we cannot witness a chariot race in the Circus Maximus, many of us have decked ourselves from head toe to express our identity as fans of a particular sports team. Consequently, ancient fashion has long been a topic of academic interest, particularly for those rare elements that survive best in the archaeological record, namely jewelry for women and military equipment for men. But these same adornments skew towards elite, highly specialized situations. Less well studied are the more routine fashion choices made by those outside the elite strata of society. One relevant overlooked category of material is the focus of this colloquium: Roman shoes. Just as for today, shoes were ubiquitous in the Roman world and served a spectrum of purposes, from the purely practical to the purely symbolic, with considerable variation across class and social status. This paper takes as a methodological case study the use of shoes to express a particular identity in a particular context: the Roman soldier within the visual culture of the capital city. In particular, I will explore how the connection between shoes and this cultural identity was understood, utilized, and exploited for aims far removed from either battle or footwear.

Why shoes? The most important reason, of course, is that both Beth and I work on shoes and wanted to hang out more. But shoes are particularly important in the context of understanding how identity was visualized and expressed daily. [2] Unlike jewelry, shoes could be purely utilitarian. [3] Unlike armor, shoes were applicable to numerous, non-specialized situations. In Rome itself a clear distinction was made between the *calcei equestres*, the high black boot of the equestrian class, [4] and the *calcei senatorii* of the most elite men in the city. The most noted distinction between the equestrian and patrician shoes was color [5], with the latter being bright red to easily distinguish status. Certainly these conventions were not adhered to at all times, but the notion and the understanding of the ability for visual dress and adornment to be used in this way is salient.

[6] If shoes, why soldiers? The Roman soldier and his shoes can be a particularly interesting case study for several reasons. The first is that the connection between outer layers and inner identity is well established for the Roman military. As a deeply hierarchical community working in potentially extreme situations, the army had specific needs to indicate quickly and obviously identity, rank, and status. In both life and art there were certain material ways to indicate identity for a Roman soldier. Armor, weaponry, and military insignia are the most obvious, and scholars have already lavished them with attention. Shoes, on the other hand, have been widely overlooked.

A word of caution to this tale: one of the challenges in studying material expressions of identity is parsing where various aspects fall on the broad spectrum from purely utilitarian to purely symbolic. [7] Are the expensive hiking shoes you bought from REI really necessary for your level of hiking? [8] Or do they represent an aspirational goal of the hiker you'd like to become? [9] Or membership of a certain wealthy but progressive social class? Such challenges obviously are exacerbated for the ancient world. [10] The second reason to study soldiers and shoes, therefore, is that this particular combination features two specialized categories of shoes where we can more clearly separate the practical from the performative.

[11] The first category of performative shoes consists of children's shoes recovered in the auxiliary fort of Vindolanda. Shoes belonging to children of a rather young age have been found in all settlement phases from the late first to the fourth centuries CE. Since children presumably were not marching, fighting, or going about any of the business of actual soldiering, certain aspects of their shoes may reflect more symbolic intentions of class and identity. These shoes, furthermore, represent the actions of the military community directly. Although individual actors and actions remain invisible, it is reasonable to presume that the soldiers were somehow involved or implicated in the messages signaled by their offspring's footwear. We thus have a rare glimpse into the choices that auxiliary soldiers made in constructing their own familial identities.

[12] The shoes in the second category, those depicted in Roman art, are similarly free of pedestrian concerns. Roman art was replete with representations of Roman soldiers and their footwear, particularly in sculpture. A sculpted shoe was not beholden to concerns of how it

would hold up in the field or whether it was appropriate for the weather. Depictions of footwear, in other words, *could* take into account concerns for actual shoes, but this was not a requirement. Of particular interest are the thousands of depicted military shoes found in Rome herself, since these shed light on how military identity was presented in the capital city by artisans associated with the imperial class--in other words, miles away from Vindolanda, both physically and socially.

In the first part of this paper I will use the assemblage of Roman shoes from the auxiliary fort at Vindolanda to demonstrate two ideas: 1) a methodology for recognizing a distinction between practical and performative aspects; and 2) the connection between shoes and identity in military life. This will lay the groundwork for the second part of the paper, which will address representations of shoes in Roman sculpture, with special attention paid to the Trajanic period, which saw a florescence in depictions of the Roman army in public settings.

[13] The site of Vindolanda is an auxiliary fort located just south of Hadrian's Wall. Its exceptional combination of excellent preservation and excavation makes it an unrivaled source of information on the everyday life of the Roman soldier along the *limes*. [14] Especially relevant here is its collections of shoes, the largest assemblage of leather footwear from any site in the empire. With around 5 thousand shoes currently in the museum collection, the assemblage gives us a unique opportunity to reveal a fair bit about the reality of this aspect of dress and its role in identity expression.

[15] The basic ‘Fell boot’ seen here in this slide is the standard military marching boot for Vindolanda. The boot is a simple enclosed leather shoe that reaches above the ankle, with a single line of holes along the top of the foot and front of the leg for fastening the shoe. Metal studs often reinforce the soles. These boots are found ubiquitously in the Vindolanda assemblage and predominate among adult male shoes, presumably due to the cold and wet climate of northern England.

Despite their simplicity and practicality, the Fell boot could still be employed to express identity and status. This can be seen by comparing the shoes excavated in the barracks with those recovered from the near-contemporary *praetorium*. While the barracks housed the rank-and-file, the *praetorium* was the residence of the commanding officer and his family. The shoes of the barracks skew purely practical. The stud pattern on the bottom usually reflects a utilitarian purpose—large studs covering much of the sole of the shoe—or is in a basic pattern that is found widely in the western provinces. [16] In the *praetorium* contexts, however, a popular style features “fishnet” uppers, a decorative scheme created by hundreds of small cut-out spaces in the leather. This is certainly an expensive shoe, with its cost shown in the detailed decoration and time consuming manufacturing process. The visual effect would be evocative of the trademark military *caligae* and would also allow the owner to wear a sock that would be clearly visible beneath the fenestration, providing the potential for color-coded distinctions in status reminiscent of those in the capital.

The discrepancy between the *praetorium* and barrack blocks in the possession of luxury items like fancy shoes is hardly unexpected, given the difference in pay and tasks. The particularities, however, suggest that the differences in footwear also had to do with the status and identity of the owner, rather than purely economic concerns. In the first place, the modifications made to the more elaborate shoes clearly favored conspicuousness over comfort. [17] While any Sex in the City fan would easily recognize this phenomenon, it is not a tradeoff modern scholarship would expect from an elite Roman soldier in an extreme climate. The pattern work would also decrease the life of the shoe, again a surprising feature in a social group associated with standing and marching.

[18] I feel compelled to take a brief aside here to call attention to the role our problematic modern conceptions concerning gender, shoes, and practicality might play in the preconceptions we bring to the study of ancient shoes, myself included. Sarah Jessica Parker, for instance, apparently has little trouble running in her Dior gladiator sandals. But anyway, holes in boots make socks wet, and if you just wanted to spend more money on shoes, the particular way that the Vindolanda officers went about it was not inevitable.

[19] Further evidence for social pressures driving the choice of footwear within the fort can be seen by comparing the shoes of children. In the barracks block, shoes belonging to children were clustered in four rooms. Of the sixteen shoes that were worn by children and have at least some evidence remaining about style, almost all follow the same style as the adult boots. [20] The primary distinction is that the children's shoes use studs sparingly with large gaps in the coverage on the tread sole, an indication of lower quality. Almost none of the children's shoes

found here have any decorative embellishments such as cut-out decoration, leather stamps, or stylized stud patterns. The children of the barracks, in summary, wore shoes that reflected utilitarian concerns of cost saving and simplicity.

We see a nearly opposite phenomenon in the *praetorium*. [21] Along with the full-sized fishnet uppers, many of the shoes from the *praetorium* with the same status-bearing style were also worn by children around the ages of 10 to 14 years. These can perhaps be explained as the prefect's sons following the professional and fashion conventions expected of their class and status, particularly as they approached their own military careers. More striking is the tiny infant's shoe, meant probably for a child of roughly 8 months to a year of age. Despite its small size, it mimics almost exactly the shoe styles that are found in adult male sizes from the same elite spaces. This includes not only meticulous cut-out decoration, but also an expensive full set of iron studs on the tread sole, even though the child was probably not yet walking, with a foot length of only about 10 to 11 cm. It seems that even the infant children of the commanding officer were held to the visual expectations of dress according to one's class. Despite the *auxiliary* context, which was likely to have been predominantly a non-citizen population, the youngest generations of an upper-class household were beholden to sartorial symbols most familiar in very Roman contexts.

This paper is too short to delve into all the aspects and implications of performative footwear at Vindolanda, and anyway that's Beth's job. My concern here is to establish that aspects of Roman military footwear could be tied to identity signaling, and to demonstrate one way to draw out that signaling aspect, namely by focusing on the separation between practical and ideological needs.

As I will show now, this same approach can be employed for represented shoes within monumental reliefs.

[22] Beginning in the late first century CE, the Roman army became one of the main topics of monumental sculpture in the capital city of Rome. Early scholarship on such depictions of soldiers tended to treat the sculptures as purely illustrative documentation of historical events. More recent scholarship has focused on the ideological forces that could drive the idealized representations seen on sculpture. It is in this light that we should consider depictions of military shoes.

Large-scale publicly commissioned sculpture can give us insight into how an audience in Rome understood and utilized the sartorial identity of a soldier. Although probably drawing on the reality of military life, sculpted Roman legionaries did not get hot or cold, tired by heavy armor or outraged by poorly conceived headgear. Instead the team involved in the production of a given monument could make representational choices based on other factors beyond logistics or a slavish documentary service.

[23] This phenomenon in action can be seen clearly on the Column of Trajan. Dedicated in 113 CE in the heart of Trajan's grand new forum in Rome, the column's helical frieze boasts probably the most famous depictions of Roman soldiers and their equipment. [24] On the frieze, legionaries build stone forts dressed in heavy segmented armor but without helmets. In the field this absurd combination would only impede and tire the soldiers without granting significant protection from assault. On the sculpture, however, it serves neatly to identify the workers as

legionaries and tie the citizen soldiers to concepts of strength and architectural construction in conquered territory.

On the column frieze, footwear serves to mark figures as members of certain groups and distinguish them from other characters--in other words, it is part of their identity. The most striking example is the footwear worn by Roman soldiers. [25] The majority of Roman soldiers wear the iconic military boot called the *caliga*, which sits above the ankle and has large open spaces in the upper leather. This distinctive shoe fits in with the general emphasis on the detailed (if not always accurate) care lavished on the soldiers' equipment. But from a logistical perspective sculpting each of these elaborate shoes would have been remarkably intricate and time consuming. This suggests that the footwear was a valuable element in the conception of a Roman soldier.

As another brief sidenote, I am aware of the methodological issue of visibility in monumental reliefs, which is a fancy way of saying that the Column of Trajan is tall and the frieze is hard to see. I never talk about visibility on a first date, however, so if you'll want to learn more about my thoughts on this issue, you'll have to buy me a virtual coffee first. Or just send me an email, I'm not sure how to make this joke work over Zoom.

One thing that is particularly intriguing about the depicted *caliga* is that it is one of the few pieces of equipment worn by both citizen legionaries and non-citizen auxiliary soldiers. [26] On the column, legionaries and auxiliary soldiers are carefully distinguished by their dress, with legionaries wearing segmented armor and auxiliaries wearing simpler leather outfits. [27] Yet

both classes wear the complicated, intricate shoes. The shoes thus serve as an important connection between both classes of soldiers.

[28] The importance of the shoes in connecting different classes of Roman soldiers can be seen best in Scene 44, where Trajan honors loyal auxiliaries and welcomes them into the Roman community, in contrast to the reticent Dacian barbarians. The auxiliary's exotic clothing is played up here, with emphasis on his short pants and flowing cloak, yet his shoes are carefully rendered as the Roman *caliga*. [29] This contrast is further heightened by the adjoining scene, which I have argued at an earlier meeting represents loyal provincial women torturing barbarians and a Roman deserter. Not only are these enemies of Rome stripped of their identifying clothing, but their feet noticeably are hidden as well.

We may recall that the boggy climate of northern England probably discouraged the use of *caligae* by the Vindolanda auxiliaries. Yet even this utilitarian observation can yield significance. Celebrating the wars in Dacia, the Column of Trajan makes much of the mountainous topography and difficult terrain of the war. This concern for the challenging environment faced by the Roman soldiers does not overcome the use of the *caliga* as a quintessential marker of their identity, the dissonance between shoe style and climate notwithstanding.

One may posit that all this was simply how the sculptors rendered shoes, but this is immediately disproven by looking at what other characters wear. [30] Trajan and his officers wear higher status, but less intricate, boots that may be used to set them apart from the soldier who needs a

sturdy *caliga* to march and fight. These boots also may be a way of referencing the aforementioned colored socks. [31] Even more significant, the Dacian enemy wear distinctive soft, shapeless booties that recall the simplest Vindolanda fell boots. [32] This holds true even for figures singled out as high status, and, interestingly, for children. [33] Just like the wooden construction that predominates for Dacian architecture, the Dacian booties make more logistical sense, generally speaking, and tie the barbarians to their wild natural setting. But they are also less technical, less sophisticated, and less eye-catching. [34] This probably tells us little about native Dacian costume, who logically should have had footwear better adapted to the distinctive terrain than the Mediterranean invaders. After all, unlike massive architecture, shoe design does not require overwhelming technical knowledge, although Dacians actually did have sophisticated engineering traditions. And unlike complex military maneuvers, most Dacians would need shoes everyday. Thus while Dacians may have worn simple boots, they may not have as well, and the Roman frieze probably tells us more about how Romans represented barbarians than Transylvania couture.

To summarize my point here: rather than just an automatic, anthropological, or documentary rendition of military equipment, the various footwear executed on the Column of Trajan frieze was actively implicated in categorizing figures as representations of various identities. Roman footwear on the frieze was complex, built to last, and specifically juxtaposed with its simplistic, impermanent counterpart of barbarian culture.

This close connection between soldiers and their shoes can be seen elsewhere in art of the capital, particularly for the 2nd century. [35] A monumental relief from an unknown building,

excavated in salvage operations in Rome, once depicted soldiers harvesting grain in a marsh; a similar scene appears on the Column of Trajan. In the relief significant care has been lavished on the soldiers' footwear. [36] Moving outside the world of narrative relief and into individual portraiture, two over-life size portrait statues of military figures, one in the Vatican and one in the Musei Capitolini, continue the trend of lavishing care on footwear. [37] If we compare this to the world of privately commissioned pieces, we see another example of children and identifiable footwear in a decorative piece now in the Museo Centrale Montemartini: a young boy, learning to string his bow and arrow, wears nothing but the boots of a soldier. In contrast, the gravestone of a cobbler features depicted shoes that resemble, but are clearly distinct from, the relatively consistent rendering of military footwear.

[38] Moving outside the capital, the Trajanic Arch at Benevento presents further evidence of the use of shoes to express identity in public monuments. In two paired panels Trajan re-enters Rome in the company of his soldiers, to be greeted by the waiting Senators and *Genius Populi*. While all the military figures wear one type of shoe, Trajan is connected to the waiting civil elites through his similar footwear. The divine *Genius Populi* is singled out not only through his distinctive iconography, but through his very stylish boots. [39] This same hierarchy of footwear, from divine to elite to common soldier, is on display in a panel where Trajan assigns colonial land to veterans. [40] Moving to the opposite side of the arch, in one panel Trajan greets auxiliary soldiers who are charged with guarding the river border. Although the auxiliaries wear distinctive and exotic headgear, they share shoe designs with Trajan's citizen entourage. [41] Yet in the paired panel where Trajan swears an oath with friendly barbarians, the barbarians,

presumably from the opposite bank of the river and therefore the same climate, wear distinctive, exotic high boots.

We have seen how actual soldiers used actual shoes to mark identity, and we have seen how artists in the capital used theoretical shoes to do the same. But can we find examples of actual soldiers using theoretical shoes? [42] Some evidence to this question can be found on the Tropaeum Traiani. Erected at the Dacian frontier contemporary to the Column of Trajan, the Tropaeum's decorations are believed to have been executed by the sort of military sculptors that often traveled with the army to provide tombstones and votive reliefs for soldiers. Here the difference in footwear between Romans and barbarians is even more exaggerated than on the Column of Trajan. While Roman soldiers wear elaborate footwear, the barbarians fight barefoot, a very poor and unlikely choice for battle in the mountains of Transylvania. The representation of footwear, in other words, seems to be purely symbolic, tied to conceptions of cultural identity and superiority. [43] The group most often associated with going about unshod in a Roman context, in fact, are slaves, who only received footwear if the task at hand required it. [44] Depicting the Dacians as barefoot thus speaks not only to their inferior present, but casts them in their future role within the empire.

In this brief paper I hope I have shown how footwear is part of the symbolic and very important representation of an individual as a member of the Roman military in particular and Roman culture in general. This was true in life and art, from the auxiliaries at the edges of empire to the imperial fora in Rome, from the emperor to the barbarian slave. The examples I have shown here are merely an introductory sample of this phenomenon, which can be extended in numerous ways and

directions within the realm of represented footwear alone. One could explore the use of sculpted shoes to clearly differentiate class in a world where all citizens wore the same basic costume, or the implications of Gaius Caesar's nickname *little soldier boot*, or Caligula. For now, I will leave you to contemplate what we lose in a virtual conference, where everyone's shoes go unseen.

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Woman with jewelry (Pompeii, TAQ 79 CE)
Naples no. 9084
Photo: M.-L. Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons

Necklace (Bay of Naples, TAQ 79 CE)
Photo: Liberati and Bourbon 2004: 291



то на оръжие в провинциите Мизия
ия има писмени сведения от Късната
ност, когато една от работилниците е
изирана при Рацария (Ratiaria).

Roman soldiers keep their armaments,
possible to be found only in the burial
acian custom, when the belongings of
ceased are left with him. There are w
sources of Late Antiquity for the produc
eapons in the provinces of Moesia and
when one of the workshops is located in
ria (Ratiaria).



Military armor (1st-2nd CE)

Rousse Regional Historical Museum, Bulgaria

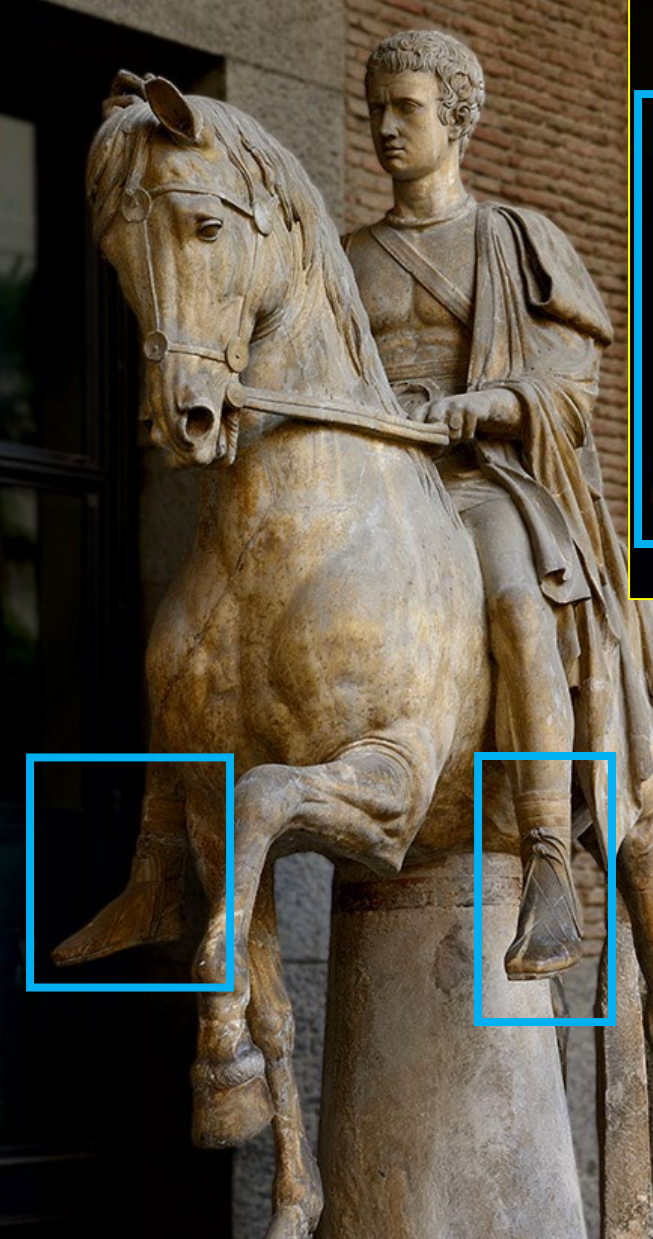
Photo: E. Thill

“Portonaccio” Sarcophagus (2nd CE)

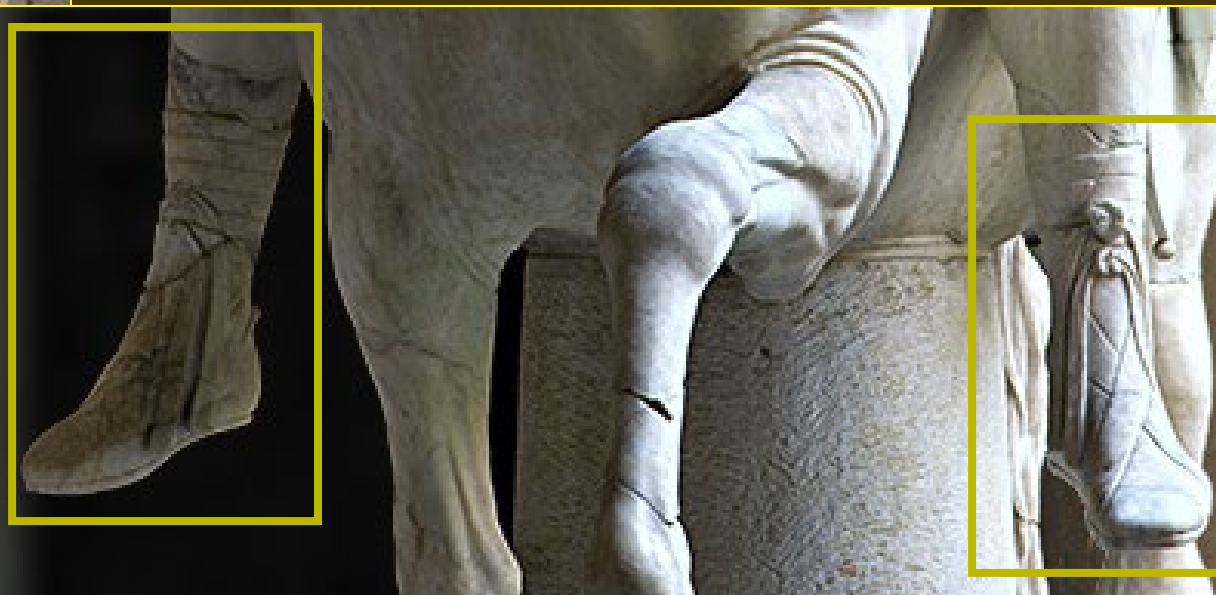
Palazzo Massimo alle Terme no. 112327

Photo: I. Shurygin





Statues of M. Nonius Balbus (Herculaneum, TAQ 79 CE)
Naples no. 6104 (left), 6211 (right)
Photo: I. Shurygin



Calcei Patricii / Senatorii



Statue of M. Olconius Rufus (Pompeii, TAQ 79 CE)
Naples no. 6233
Photo: S. Sosnovskiy

Calcei Patricii / Senatorii



Why Shoes and Soldiers?

1. Connection between inner identity and outward expression





Lowa
Camino GTX FG Hiking Boots - Men's
\$370.00





Lowa
Camino GTX FG Hiking Boots - Men's
\$370.00



Lowa
Camino GTX FG Hiking Boots - Men's
\$370.00



Why Shoes and Soldiers?

1. Connection between inner identity and outward expression
2. Performative footwear

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1. Connection between inner identity and outward expression
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A. Children's shoes at Vindolanda



Why Shoes and Soldiers?

1. Connection between inner identity and outward expression
2. Performative footwear
 - A. Children's shoes at Vindolanda
 - B. Depicted shoes



Vindolanda: the Site



Roman fort and settlement
1st – 4th CE
Northern England

Vindolanda: Shoe Assemblage



- Largest assemblage of Roman leather from anywhere in the Empire
- c. 5000 individual shoes
- often contextualized within structures and rooms
 - *periods 2-5, ca. 90-130 CE*
- or found within ditches associated with a particular phase of occupation
 - *all periods, ca. 85-300 CE*

Vindolanda: Common Fell Boot (*Barracks*)



Fell boots (Period IV/105-120 CE)
Photo: E. Greene and the Vindolanda Trust



Vindolanda: “Fishnet” Boot (*Praetorium*)



Fishnet boots (Period III/100 CE)
Photo: E. Greene and the Vindolanda Trust





Sarah Jessica Parker wearing Dior gladiator sandals (c. \$700+)
Sex and the City: the Movie (2008)



Auxiliaries marching (Column of Trajan Scene 131)
casts in Museo della Civiltà Romana (MdCR), EUR
Photo: E. Thill





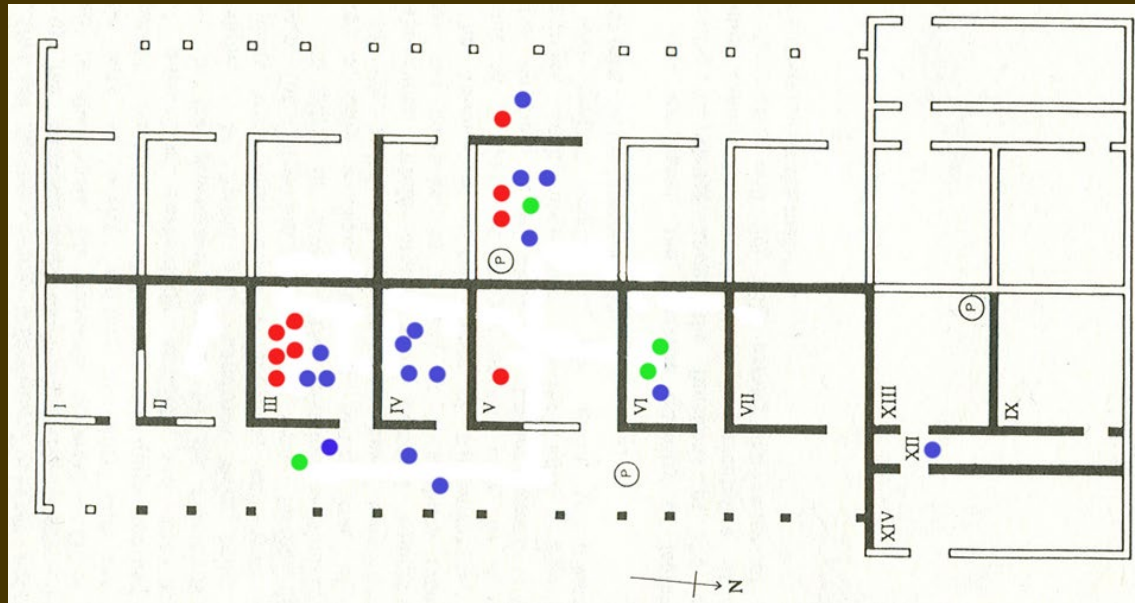
Sarah Jessica
Sex and the



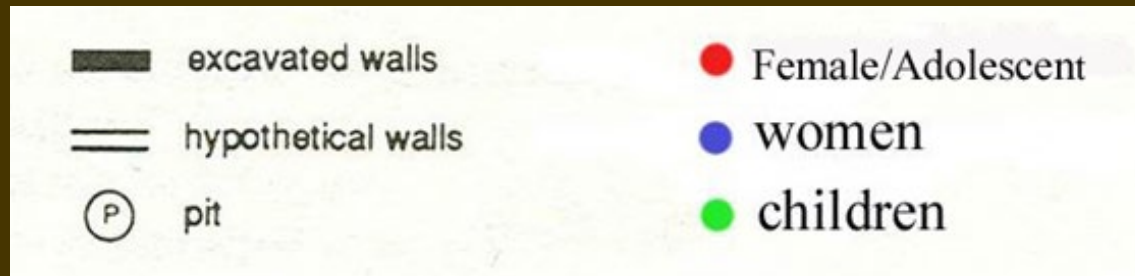
umn of Trajan Scene 131)
iltà Romana (MdCR), EUR
Photo: E. Thill



Vindolanda: Children's Footwear (*Barracks*)



Distribution of shoes for women and children
(barrack block, Period IV/105-120 CE)
Diagram: E. Greene and the Vindolanda Trust



Vindolanda: Children's Footwear (*Barracks*)



Utilitarian stud pattern on children's shoes
(barrack block, Period IV/105-120 CE)
Photo: E. Greene and the Vindolanda Trust

Vindolanda: Children's Footwear (*Praetorium*)



Fishnet boots of children
and infants (Period III/100 CE)
Photo: E. Greene and the Vindolanda Trust



Rome: Soldiers in Monumental Reliefs

“Cancellaria” Relief A (1st CE)
Vatican Museo Gregoriano Profano
Photo: S. Sosnovskiy



Arch of Constantine (3rd CE)
Rome; Photo: E. Thill

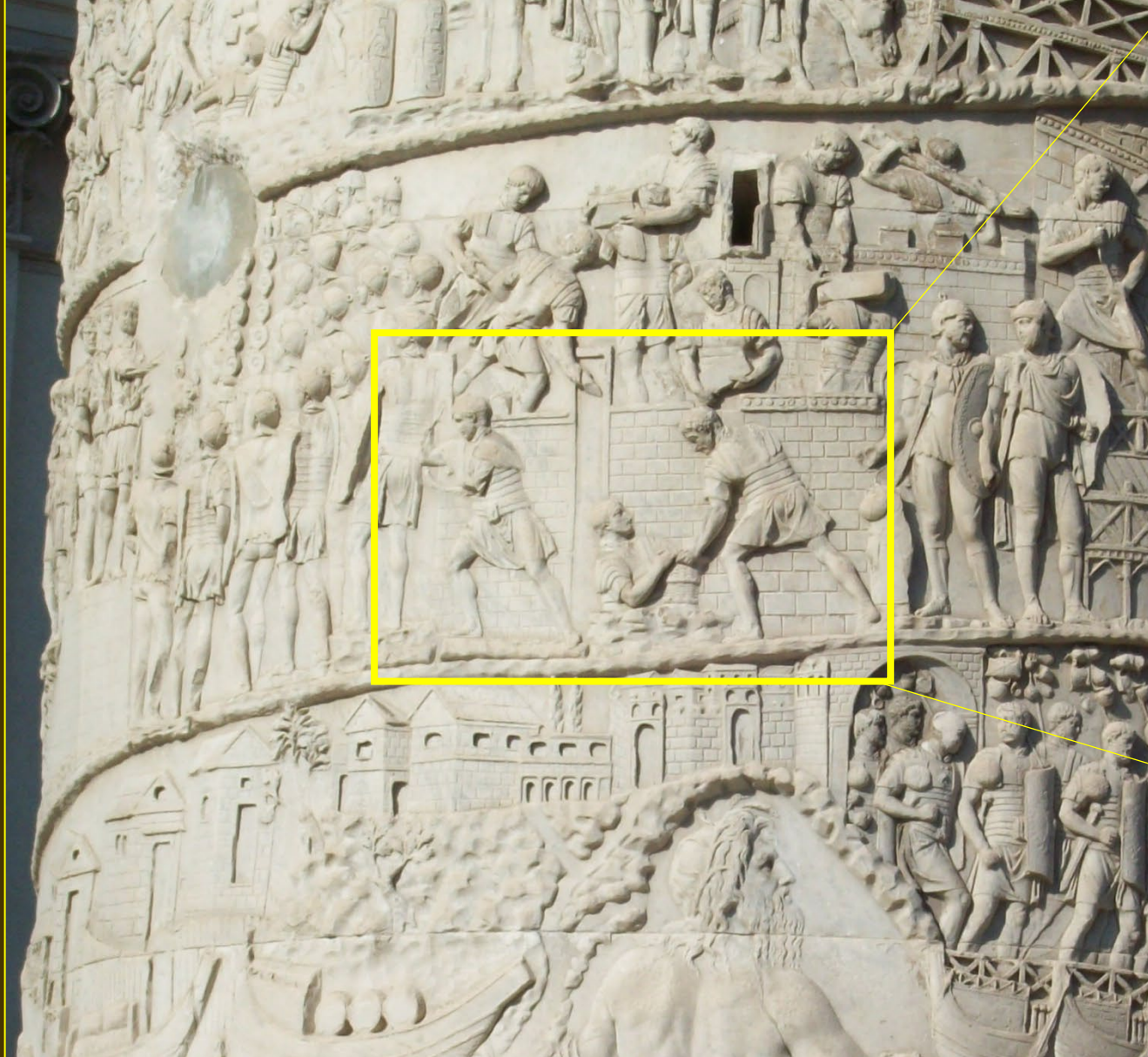


Column of Antinous
Pious (2nd CE)
Vatican Museums
Photo: E. Thill





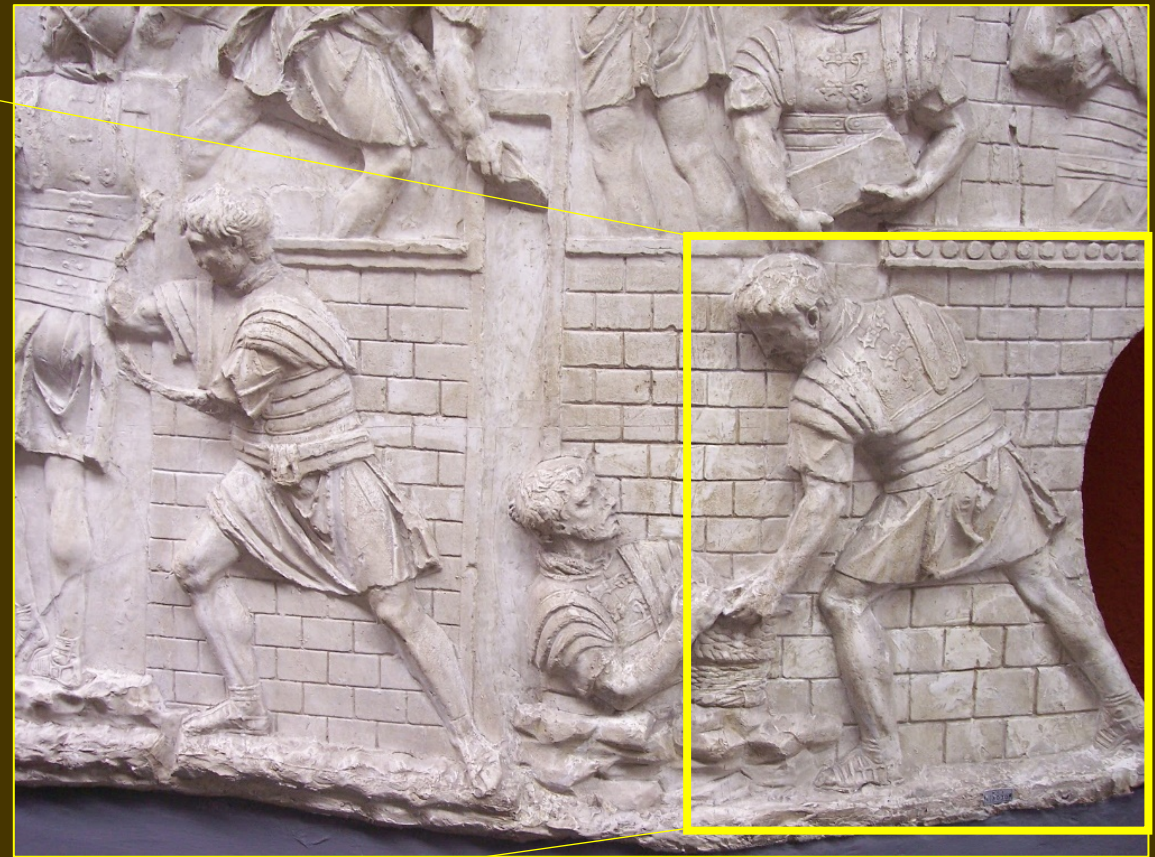
Detail of helical frieze of Column of Trajan (113 CE)
Forum of Trajan (Rome)
Photo: E. Thill



Legionaries in
construction scene (S11)
casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill

Detail of helical frieze of Column of Trajan (113 CE)
Forum of Trajan (Rome)
Photo: E. Thill





Legionaries in
construction scene (S11)
casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill



Legionaries (*left*) vs
auxiliaries (*right*) (S21)
casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill



Legionaries (*left, S71*) vs
auxiliaries (*right, S131*)
casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill



Trajan receiving and
rewarding auxiliaries (S44)
casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill





Provincial women punishing
enemies, including a Roman deserter
(S45)
casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill



Trajan with officers addressing troops (including auxiliaries) (S104)
casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill





S115

Dacian footwear
casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill



Fell boot *Photo: E. Greene and the Vindolanda Trust*

S120





S115



S91



casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill

Roman auxiliaries burn
wooden Dacian buildings (S25)



Roman soldiers arrive on an arched quay of a
Roman town (S115)



Roman legionaries construct Roman buildings
(S11)



casts in EUR MdCR
Photo: E. Thill

Dacian leaders take
poison or drink last
water rations at end
of siege (S120)

Marsh Relief (1st - 2nd CE)
Palazzo Massimo alle Terme no. 52263
Photo: E. Thill



Monumental portraiture (1st - 2nd CE)

Photo: E. Thill

Palazzo dei Conservatori no. 1098



Vatican no. 2582



Boy stringing
bow (2nd CE)
*Centrale
Montemartini
no. 1108
Photo: E. Thill*

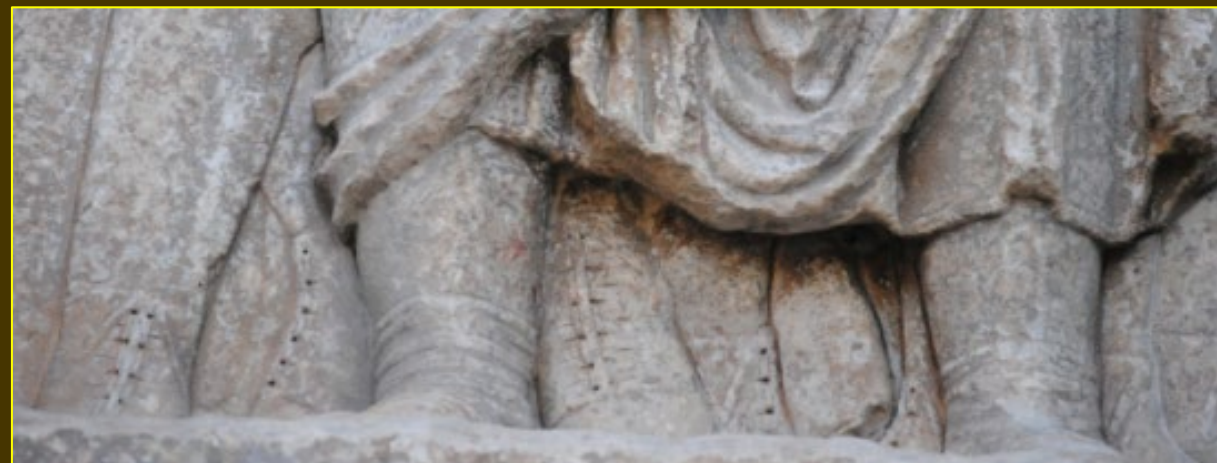


Cobbler's
Grave Relief
(1st CE)
*Centrale
Montemartini
no. 930
Photo: E. Thill*





Trajan's (right)
adventus to
senators and
Genius
Arch of
Beneventum
(114 CE)
Photo: E. Thill



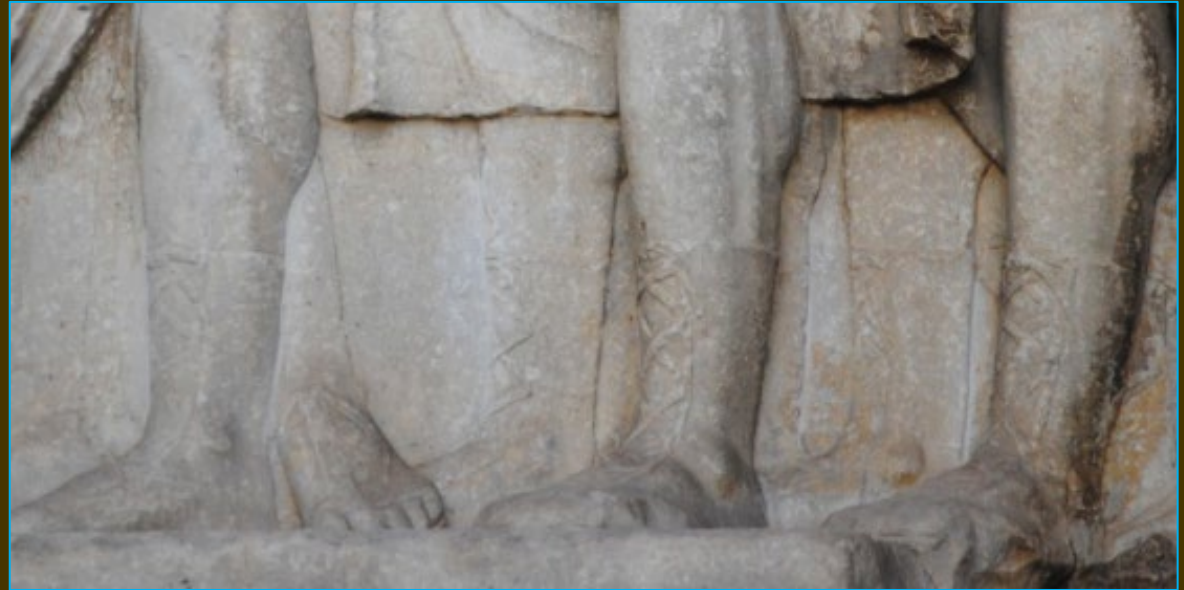


Trajan assigning land to veterans
Arch of Beneventum (114 CE)
Photo: E. Thill



Trajan visiting auxiliaries at border
Arch of Beneventum (114 CE)
Photo: E. Thill





Trajan visiting barbarian allies at river border
Arch of Beneventum (114 CE)
Photo: E. Thill

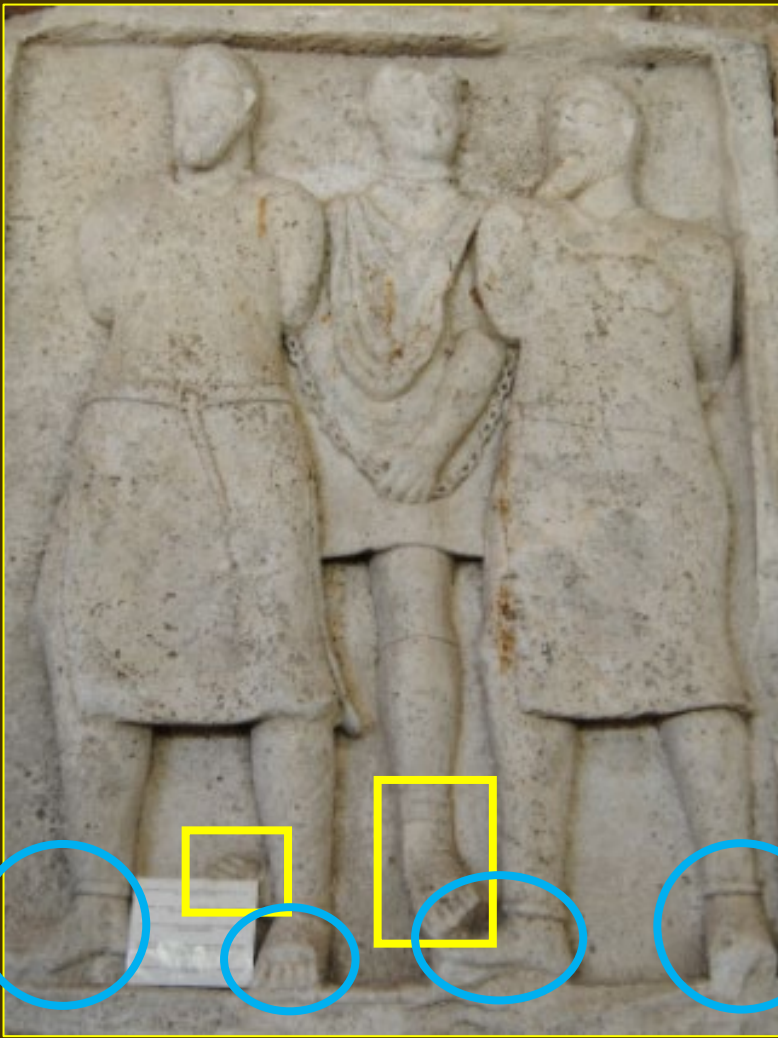
Roman soldiers
marching

Tropaeum Traiani
(c. 107 CE)
Metope XXXIX
Archaeological
Museum
Adamclisi
Photo: E. Thill



Roman soldier with barbarian prisoners

Tropaeum Traiani (c. 107 CE) unnumbered metope
Archaeological Museum Adamclisi
Photo: E. Thill





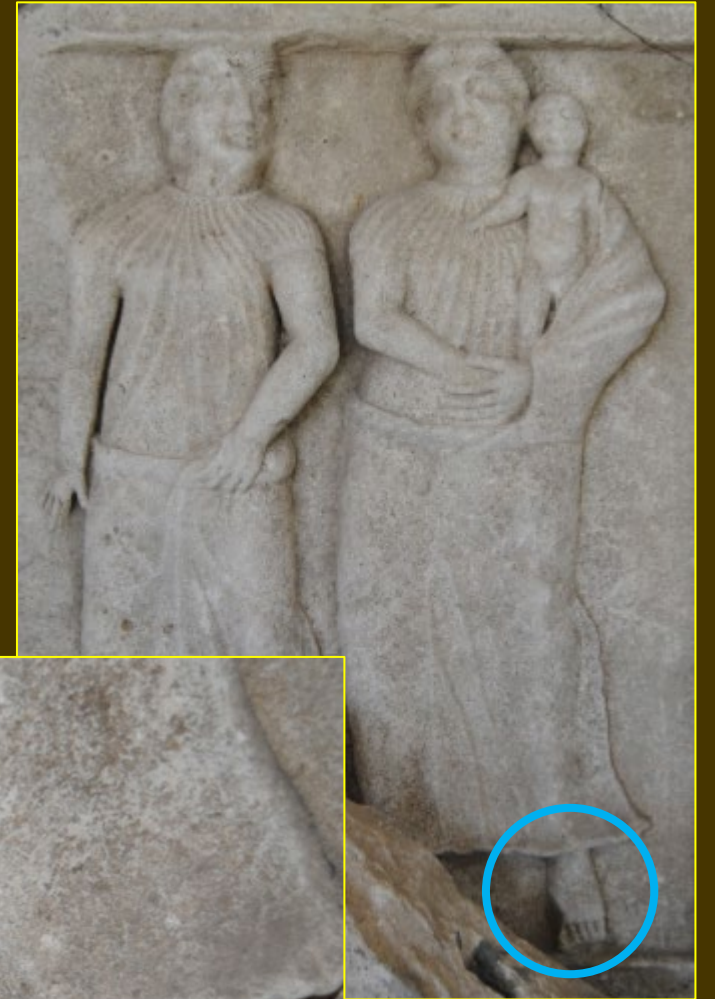
Barbarian women and child

Tropaeum Traiani (c. 107 CE)

unnumbered metope

Archaeological Museum Adamclisi

Photo: E. Thill



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